# Artistic research within a lab of possibilities: exploring post-digital ignorance in *a'21 amberNetworkFestival*

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## Abstract

During COVID-19, the emergence of collective knowledge production networking, the development of common resource pools and resilient commoning practices were thoroughly weakened. In addition, such a paradigmatic crisis has made ignorance and its consequences more visible on a planetary scale. In this article, we asked what kind of research would enable us to explore the possibilities of co-learning and critically reflect on the various forms of ignorance production for the purposes of commoning in a range of settings. Based on laboratory studies in Science, Technology and Society (STS), we aim to explore the contemporary interventions of community building and commoning

practices performed in artistic research. Becoming powerful creative forces in their own right, art and technology festivals have augmented the possibilities of how various actors relate to each other, express themselves to wider society, and self-organize in order to challenge current problems on a planetary scale. Our ethnographic study, which included interviews, document analysis, participant observations, case study, game design and online focus group meetings, was based on a hybrid mode of artistic research within *a'21 amberNetworkFestival*, a co-curated, decentralized and translocal art and technology festival. As a self-reflexive research outcome, the findings of our study reveal that artistic research merging scientific study, online applications, gamification, and performance can be developed for the examination of ignorance production and enhance translocal commoning, co-production and co-learning in various settings. Thus, artistic research within "a lab of possibilities" can allow different communities to collaborate on a common task by providing coordination without consensus.

## Keywords

artistic research; art and technology; STS; laboratory; ignorance; collaborative learning

## *Investigación artística dentro de un laboratorio de posibilidades: explorar la ignorancia posdigital en el* a'21 amberNetworkFestival

### *Resumen*

*Durante la pandemia por la COVID-19, la aparición de redes de producción de conocimiento colectivo, el desarrollo de fondos de recursos comunes y las prácticas resilientes de* commoning *se debilitaron en gran medida. Además, una crisis tan paradigmática como es esta ha hecho que el desconocimiento y sus consecuencias sean más visibles a escala planetaria. En este artículo, nos preguntamos qué tipo de investigación nos permitiría explorar las posibilidades del aprendizaje mutuo y reflexionar críticamente sobre las diversas formas de producción de desconocimiento para compartir recursos en distintos contextos. Basándonos en estudios de laboratorio en ciencia, tecnología y sociedad (STS, del inglés* science, technology and society*), nuestro objetivo es explorar las políticas contemporáneas de construcción de comunidades y las prácticas de* commoning *llevadas a cabo en la investigación artística. Los festivales de arte y tecnología, que se han convertido en poderosas herramientas creativas en sí mismas, han aumentado las posibilidades de interrelación entre diversos actores, se expresan ante una sociedad más amplia y se autoorganizan para hacer frente a los problemas actuales a escala planetaria. Nuestro estudio etnográfico, que incluyó entrevistas, análisis de documentos, observaciones de los participantes, estudio de casos, diseño de juegos y reuniones telemáticas de grupos de debate, se basó en un modo híbrido de investigación artística dentro del a'21 amberNetworkFestival, un festival de arte y tecnología coorganizado, descentralizado y translocalizado. Como resultado de una investigación autorreflexiva, los hallazgos de nuestro estudio revelan que la investigación artística que combina el estudio científico, las aplicaciones en línea, la ludificación y el rendimiento se pueden desarrollar para examinar la producción de desconocimiento y mejorar la puesta en común translocal, la coproducción y el aprendizaje mutuo en varios contextos. Por lo tanto, la investigación artística dentro de «un laboratorio de posibilidades» puede permitir que diferentes comunidades colaboren en una tarea común proporcionando coordinación sin consenso.*

### *Palabras clave*

*investigación artística; arte y tecnología; STS; laboratorio; desconocimiento; aprendizaje colaborativo*

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a paradigmatic crisis, which has made ignorance and its consequences more visible on a planetary scale. We needed to rethink "the conscious, unconscious, and structural production of ignorance, its diverse causes and conformations, whether brought about by neglect, forgetfulness, myopia, extinction, secrecy, or suppression" (Proctor 2008, 3). Furthermore, we found it necessary to explore "how, where, and why ignorance, once produced, becomes institutionalized" (Frickel 2014, 263). In fact, many scholars have focused on the social construction of ignorance and its instrumental value to the reproduction of power relations during COVID-19 (Al Dahdah, Falisse and Lurton 2021; Fortaleza 2020; Timmermann 2020; Paul and Haddad 2023). Self-organizing, self-reflexive, and self-aware commonings "explore, reuse, reveal, and subvert" these power relations and contribute to a process of alternative knowledge production (Yetiskin 2020, 225). For us, there was also another critical question: what kind of research would enable us to explore the possibilities of co-learning and critically reflect on the various forms of ignorance production for the purpose of commoning in a range of settings?

Conventional thinking in academic boundaries would have led us to merge laboratory practice, scientific research, and knowledge production quasi-automatically. However, we aimed to engage and deal with contemporary forms of ignorance production and research practice within converging fields. Therefore, based on artistic research, laboratory studies (Latour and Woolgar 1986; Knorr-Cetina 1981; 1995; 1999; Lynch 2017) and feminist versions of Science, Technology and Society (STS) (Barad 2007; Haraway 1991; 1997; Jasanoff 2004), this article emerged as a form of self-reflection intended to explore a hybrid mode of artistic research within a collaborative, decentralized and translocal art and technology festival, *a'21 amberNetworkFestival* (2021), which focused on "Post-Digital Ignorance" during the pandemic. In fact, the festival had a special section entitled "the LAB", where 30 invited participants collectively researched, created, produced, curated, and performed. However, in this article, we examine the entire *a'21 amberNetworkFestival* process as a "lab of possibilities" for experimenting on various explorations and interventions of translocal commoning, artistic research, and contemporary ignorance production.

In recent years, artistic research has become at once a popular and a controversial idea, which embodies flexible interpretations. While one may argue that the process of creating art has always required research, since the 1990s, the term has been commonly used to describe artists' work within academic settings or in close collaboration with academic researchers. The same tendency is also referred to "as practice-led research, art-based research, artistic enquiry and arts-informed practices" (Borgdorff 2010, 18; Mäkelä, Nimkulrat, Dash and Nsenga 2011, 3; McNiff 2013; Smith 2008). Under the umbrella of the term "artistic research", different forms of contextualization arise, such as art with research, art about research, and art as research (Busch 2009, 2-3).

Of the three, in this article, art as research best fits with our interest in suggesting a lab of possibilities in which techno-scientific derivations and academic studies become the instrument of art, and artistic means are used to analyze and work with a contemporary problem, such as ignorance production, within an art and technology festival.

What we also found interesting was that "Science, Technology, Society (STS) studies that focus on the knowledge production processes in the laboratories have revealed that nothing specifically scientific happens inside them" (Amsterdamska 2007, 205). Laboratory study scholars adopted the position of anthropologists describing the daily life of a strange tribe and revealed that "doing(s) and knowing(s) in the laboratories are performative and they occur as social interactions, a series of protocols and practices" (Felt, Fouche, Miller and Smith-Doerr, 2017, 2). In relation to knowledge production, those actions in conjunction form what we call experiments (Salter, Burri & Dumit 2017, 146).

As experiments can be conducted in various settings, a laboratory is not bound to a unique physical structure; it is open to creating other possible ways of (un)doing(s) and (un)knowing(s) such as exhibitions, speculative design fictions and art-science intersections (Gabrys and Yusoff 2011, 7; Kräftner, Kroell, Ramsebner, Peschta and Warner 2010; Latour and Weibel 2006). A laboratory can also be a process in which artistic research can be generated by translocal agencies that use multiple methodologies, cultural techniques, and ways of (un)doing(s) and (un)knowing(s). Bippus (2013, 127) argued that "[i]n an openly experimental, hybrid array situated in a networked web-like laboratory, artistic experiments do not seek to generate general theories. They explore inferences and possibilities by ironically and in an analytical or critical way of undermining systems of regulation from within".

One of the critical principles in feminist STS research is the ability of researchers to approach their topic with "skilled practices" (Haraway 1988, 587) and thus conceptualize their field of inquiry from within. Therefore, in the first phase (2013-2020) of our ethnographic study, one of us became a participant, and in 2020, the curator of *amberPlatform* – a node of the festival. She actively engaged with the collective in order to explore the processes and boundaries of its community building, "co-productions" (Jasanoff 2004, 43), and commoning practices by organizing its conferences, giving talks at its public engagement events, writing journalistic articles, and participating in administrative tasks and brainstorming meetings. In the first phase, we conducted unstructured interviews, document analysis, participant observations, and online focus group meetings in order to explore how contemporary ignorance production was understood within local and translocal contexts. Investigator triangulation was adopted for validating the field notes. The first part of the article will reveal our relevant research findings. During and after the festival, in the second phase (2020-2022), on which we will concentrate in the last part of this article, we furthered our research by adopting investigator and methodological triangulation. We combined artistic and scientific methods, such as performance, case study, presentation, document analysis, structured interviews, game design,

and focus group meetings in order to broaden our perspective, explore new possibilities, and further interpret the research findings of the first phase by undertaking a comparative analysis of how ignorance has been effective during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey and Germany.

## 1. A lab of possibilities: *a'21 amberNetworkFestival*

Becoming powerful creative forces in their own right, art and technology festivals have augmented the possibilities of how various actors relate to each other and express themselves to wider society and self-organize in order to challenge current problems on a planetary scale. During the pandemic, the *a'21 amberNetworkFestival* was developed as a self-organized translocal collaborative curatorial assemblage. The network members, along with invited artists and academic researchers from various locations, curated, created, and performed collectively and remotely during the two-month period of the festival between March and May 2021. As a way of commoning practice and a continuum of *amberFestival*, which was organized in Istanbul between 2007 and 2015, the artistic director, Ekmel Ertan, and co-curators, Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud, designed the *a'21 amberNetworkFestival* collaboratively as a concept. Renata Salecl's article "Big Data: Big Ignorance" (Salecl 2017) inspired them to develop the festival's theme.

All events were realized and streamed online translocally in *amberPlatform* (Istanbul), *Darağaç* (Izmir), *New Media Society* (Tehran), *DAH Project* (Shiraz), *KounAktif* (Casablanca), *BAAB* (Khartoum), *Shahraban* (Baalbek), *Bishkek Contemporary* (Bishkek) and *The Arab Digital Expression Foundation - ADEF* (Cairo, Berlin). Each network node was mainly assembled via the relations of the curators. Besides some of the network node curators also knew each other from previous collaborations and friendships. As part of the core working methodology, although agreeing on working on a fixed topic assembled the network, each node curator had their own program and prioritized certain issues for selected local urgencies in relation to the festival's theme. The festival has also become a folding process in which the mutual constitution of entangled agencies can emerge thanks to their partial views and halting voices, turning into a collective force by means of "intra-action" (Barad 2007, 33).

As one of the prominent feminist STS scholars, Barad understands agency not as an inherent property of an individual or human to be exercised, but rather as a dynamism of forces in which all designated agencies are exchanged and co-produced (Barad 2007, 141). From a political-economic perspective, the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic caused financial and mobility restrictions at an international level for many cultural workers and independent art initiatives. Not all countries have supported artistic research. Moreover, in some countries, like Turkey and Iran, artistic and academic expression was highly restricted and, in some cases, censored. Thus, self-organized, decentralized, collectively curated translocal festivals and networks have been developed

with the financial infrastructure of those countries that have supported artistic research during the pandemic.

One of the pioneers of laboratory studies, Knorr-Cetina (1981), stressed the contingent and local character of knowledge production, showing that how an experiment proceeds depends as much on what equipment happens to be available, what money has been allocated to, and how resource use needs to be justified as on widely accepted procedures. *a'21 amberNetworkFestival* became possible with the financial support of the Capital Cultural Fund of The German Federal Government and the State of Berlin, which aimed to promote important cultural projects in the federal capital to enhance Germany's overall image. However, a translocal community-building network within a festival format was designed for translocal commoning by ignoring, subverting, and transgressing the promotion of a nationalist cultural ideology. As one of the obligatory terms of the fund protocol was to develop projects with a local partner, *Oyoun Berlin* was tactically integrated into the fund application as well as into the network in collaboration with *amberPlatform* (Istanbul).

However, from the beginning of the festival preparations, we observed that one of the principal agents of the festival's administration and financial management – the CEO of *Oyoun Berlin* – did not adopt commoning values, but rather maintained an abusive and patronizing position followed by monetary threats by addressing network curators either individually or in group e-mails. Moreover, as a publicly supported institution that claims to be queer-feminist, de-colonialist, and migrant-friendly, we noted how contemporary ignorance production was also institutionalized via its social media through the appropriation of hegemonic identity politics, targeting, and denunciatory language. This controversy has created serious tensions as well as critical discussions among network members, who wrote a collective statement which was neither addressed individually nor shared publicly. Instead, the collective who worked on contemporary forms of ignorance production decided to implement affirmative ignorance towards the violent acts of one network member for commoning purposes and embraced its core community-building values such as solidarity, resilience, care, trust, sustainability, collaboration without consensus and democratic participation for the sake of translocal commoning.

Although the festival was planned to be organized in the facilities at *Oyoun Berlin*, due to pandemic restrictions at an international level, the collective had to adopt a hybrid format. *a'21 amberNetworkFestival*'s events, which consist of artworks, lectures, panels, performances, presentations, screenings, talks, and workshops, were synchronized with YouTube and realized through an application, Big Blue Button: "a web-based video conferencing system and open-source learning software that enables educational institutions to reach their students remotely" (Hashimi 2020, 59; Bubaš and Čižmešija 2020, 63; Osterman 2016, 395). This application enabled both individualization and collaborative learning in terms of not only allowing the public to access online events synchronously but also providing an open resource to be

accessed later through the application's recording feature. The documentation and archive of the festival website, which was designed by Daniele Savasta, who tactically selected a black background and a not easy-to-read colorful typography at first glance, also became a critical intervention on the rethinking of ignorance production, mainly from the perspective of the Global South.

Collaborative learning and collective knowledge-production processes commonly start with a simple protocol based on the identification of joint objectives, inquiries, and the creation of a shared problem definition used to derive new knowledge (Vansina 2008). However, instead of defining the research problem from above, the festival adopted a horizontal and decentralized approach aimed at extracting latent possibilities. From an STS point of view, the theme of ignorance can be considered a "boundary object", which means "to perform negotiations and translations among different research disciplines" (Schindler 2019, 104). Boundary objects act as mediators in hybrid and heterogeneous research teams (Star and Griesemer 1989, 412, 413). Another useful aspect of boundary objects is that they permit collaboration activities across different socio-technoscientific worlds (Halpern 2012, 924, 925). By using ignorance as a boundary object, a series of activities were organized by way of experimental artistic research.

For example, as one of the curatorial nodes of *a'21 amberNetworkFestival*, *amberPlatform* curated by Ebru Yetişkin in Istanbul, focused on agnotology, which is the study of ignorance production. As part of the curatorial research design within laboratory studies, first, a group of artists and academic researchers within close reach were invited into an online focus group meeting via Zoom on January 21, 2021. The participants noted that, although there has been popular interest in the role of art and technology in developing intelligence and smartness within society, today we experience the contagion of post-digital ignorance in various ways on a planetary scale. In this online focus meeting, it immediately became apparent that there was no consensus among the participants regarding the definition of ignorance. Although the group discussed various meanings, connotations, flexible interpretations, and various slips in translations, we observed that a concentrated interest emerged in examining how to identify and tactically reuse the contemporary ignorance production in various ways for commoning purposes.

The starting point for the experiment was based on the need to establish some flexible boundaries within the artistic research. In order to set the scope of research, participants were asked to describe an urgent problem to respond to in their everyday life in local settings. Limiting the scope of research was also aimed at empowering "response-ability practiced with a sense of responsibility" for the sake of commons and commonings (Wodiczko 2004, 28; Haraway 2008, 88; Barad 2012, 208). The participants were asked to structure and propose their work by clarifying briefly how they could experiment with creating various ways of revealing and dealing with ignorance (production) within a hybrid mode of an art and technology festival.

So, instead of adopting overcontrol and overdetermination by selecting works with a particular focus on ignorance, the curatorial approach of Ebru Yetişkin mainly concentrated on artists/researchers who adopt ignorance as an open source for self-reflexive and experimental interventions. The wide range of works, from those problematizing disinformation and climate change to queer-feminist mediations, speculative design fiction, and AI, as well as virtual reality and bio-art, demonstrated that today's conditions of ignorance production are well dispersed and that there can be many ways to work with it collectively. It also revealed that the study of ignorance production is also open to further transdisciplinary research.

## 2. An experimentation in artistic research: post-digital enlightenment in the COVID-19 pandemic

Ignorance is commonly emerging and underestimated when there is a knowledge gap: that is, where knowledge has not yet been fixed or infiltrated. It is in this way that ignorance becomes a kind of vacuum in which knowledge is constructed towards the benefits of powerful political, industrial, and corporate agencies. The first phase of our research findings revealed that it is critical to explore and tactically intervene in how ignorance is situated, constructed, maintained, and manipulated in a range of settings. In the second phase of our research, the instructors and students of the STS MA program of the Istanbul Technical University (ITU), and Time-Based Media and Performance class of the Universität der Künste Berlin (UdK Berlin) developed a collaborative online lecture and performance as a commoning practice between January and May 2021.

At first, we noted that there was no fixed protocol for experimentation. However, the artistic director of the festival, Ekmel Ertan, as well as the instructors, Ebru Yetişkin and Milena Bühring, reached an agreement on how to combine artistic research and academic study by outlining a general framework and timeline. As stated earlier, ignorance was considered a boundary object to perform negotiations and translations: in this case, between artistic and scientific settings, and between STS and art students. The instructors reviewed the experimentation idea with their students, discussed their possible skilled practices and responsibilities, and decided to develop the content, and shape the experimentation collectively within an ongoing research process.

As part of the festival, Ebru Yetişkin and Erkan Saka delivered a keynote presentation on March 15, 2021 regarding online fact-checking mechanisms and theoretical methodologies for distinguishing information from disinformation. Disinformation is fed by ignorance, and in turn it feeds ignorance. Between January and February 2021, ITU STS students worked on a case study in which each student provided a conceptual analysis about the production of disinformation and ignorance about COVID-19 vaccines, especially on social media in Turkey.

Then ITU STS students delivered an online group presentation to the UdK Berlin group via Zoom within a panel format on April 1, 2021. The presentations focused on the examination of:

1) anti-vaccine radical Islamists as a relevant social group within the social construction of ignorance about the vaccines;
2) disinformation as a source of popular entertainment in social media;
3) the role of popular doctors in the production of disinformation;
4) the impact of health politics of the present state/government in Turkey;
5) conceptual models of public understanding of science;
6) techno-feminist critique of vaccine hesitancy, and
7) the use of media disinformation as a marketing tool during the vaccine development process.

After the students' presentations, there was some discussion and social interaction. The facilitating and moderating role of the instructors was kept to a minimum. Although the students of UdK Berlin articulated that they had no problem understanding the findings, we observed that most faced obstacles in furthering the discussion or engaging with one another through the research findings. Upon further examination, we explored that the formal transfer of excessive information and scientific language created a boundary as well as an interaction barrier among the participants. Due to methodological differences between scientific and artistic practices, we noted that a knowledge gap emerged, and ignorance was accordingly constructed within the knowledge production process in order to explore whether it would lead to a change in the second stage of the experiment.

After a month, the instructor and the students of the UdK Berlin situated this shared ignorance production as a contemporary collective experience and explored its tactical manipulation for commoning purposes. Using their artistic skills and techniques, they responded with a collaborative online performance entitled, "Post Digital Enlightenment": an opinion poll designed to reflect on and dismantle how a group's opinions were shaped in times of pandemic, how polarization in opinions might have been influenced by pandemic lifestyles, and finally how this might have changed our perception of post-pandemic life. There was a 28-question pop-up quiz prepared on Kahoot.it, a popular e-learning and gamification platform. Displaying the structured questions prepared on this gaming application on a screen-shared medium via Zoom allowed for a protocol as well as an exercise for both UdK Berlin and ITU students to perform by connecting with each other through their own mobile devices.

As both experiments were recorded and shared in real-time via YouTube, each participant was also invited to use an avatar in order to enhance social interaction. The inclusion of anonymity and play elements into the gamification systems created a more flexible intra-action and horizontal structure between the distinct languages and interests of art and science students. Without the necessity for goal-scoring, the performance enhanced engagement levels through gaming experiences in education. The performance included a vibrant class discussion and a communicative space for sharing experiences, opening up the possibility of engaging with the epistemic input provided by ITU students. Hesitating particularly over making the right choice within a limited time or in the event of being unsure, the participants have expressed that they became more aware of their ignorance (production). Through this experimental performance, it has been revealed that each participant deliberately ignored their own lack of knowledge while making decisions and giving judgments. Thus, the parody of not knowing, within the situated ignorance production process, created possibilities for effective collaboration, interaction, self-reflexive rethinking, and reimagining.

## Conclusion

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have experienced how a hybrid mode of artistic research within art and technology festivals became a critical instrument for creative and experimental interventions. Situating *a'21 amberNetworkFestival* as a lab of possibilities, we have observed that a translocal commoning practice can be organized through artistic research. If designed to act as exploratory thought experiments, artistic research in labs of possibilities can also open up possible ways to strengthen public engagement with science and technology as boundary-crossing practices.

For this, collective curatorial approaches can be developed for researchers and educators to create their own empirical structures within experimental settings, which may also generate temporary situations and networking that would allow for dynamic relationalities and translations across the slippery boundaries between knowledge and ignorance, or science and art, to stimulate unpredictable forms of knowledge production. Thus, as new possibilities emerge from the experimental settings, researchers can capture these with no possibility whatsoever of obligatory anticipation, objective explanation, or construction.

By suggesting a lab of possibilities, we finally emphasize that gamification and game-based learning techniques used on online platforms can enhance learning outcomes and creativity both in education and in art. Through hybrid modes and gamification, we have seen how the participants engaged in deeper discussions with greater enthusiasm and how the co-learning activity itself became more enjoyable as well as experimental. Game-based learning is not a stationary activity where participants merely passively absorb the knowledge provided by the instructor(s). Rather, knowledge is collectively produced in a performative manner during experimentation in artistic research.

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Born in Turkey in 1976, she is an associate professor, a sociologist, and an independent curator. Her works are focused on co-producing transdisciplinary and experimental research in science, technology, politics, and arts. Since 2003, she has been a full-time researcher at Istanbul Technical University. Having studied Radio-TV-Cinema at Istanbul University, she completed her master's in Science, Technology, Society (STS) at Louis Pasteur University and Istanbul Technical University. She received her doctorate degree in sociology in Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University. Her curatorial research includes exhibitions such as *Cacophony* (2013), *Code Unknown* (2014), and *Waves* (2015), and public seminar series, such as *Contagious Bodies, Contemporary Art: Yet Another* and *STS Talks*. Among her international (co)curatorial works, there are *Dystopia Sound Art Festival / Berlin* (2018), *a'21 amberNetworkFestival*, and *Entre'acte* (2022) in Belgrade. In 2020, she was selected a board member of the Association of International Art Critics (AICA) in Turkey. She is also a founding member of IstanbuLab: Science, Technology and Society (STS) Platform in Istanbul; and FEMeeting - Women in Art, Science and Technology.

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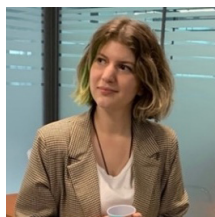
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